

Md. law granting illegals reduced tuition to cost millions

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Allowing Maryland's illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition to attend the state's public universities is expected to cost at least \$3.5 million in five years.

Fiscal analysts expect that expense to grow annually, though, as more students become eligible for the lower rates. But they don't know how much since it's so difficult to track illegal immigrants.

Budget analysts estimate the measure will cost nearly \$1 million by fiscal 2014, the year the state will begin contributing tuition money to illegal immigrants who enroll in a community college in fall 2011.

The estimate assumes roughly 370 undocumented students will enroll, costing the state at least \$778,400 in fiscal 2014.

Some lawmakers say the cost estimates are too low, however, with census figures estimating that at least 300,000 illegal immigrants live in Maryland.

The state pays about \$2,100 for every community college student who qualifies for in-state tuition. Community college tuition is two to three times less expensive for in-state students.

But the costs don't end there.

Illegal immigrants can transfer to a four-year university and pay in-state rates if they have completed two years at a community college, under the law passed by the Maryland General Assembly and expected to be signed by Gov. Martin O'Malley.

Lawmakers passed a last-minute amendment to ensure that Maryland citizens

will not have to compete with undocumented students for in-state slots. Therefore, out-of-state students -- who drive tuition revenues by paying much higher rates -- will be competing with undocumented students.

The difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition rates at Maryland's four-year universities averages more than \$10,000 for a single semester, with the gap about \$8,200 at the University of Maryland.

Universities will be forced to adjust their enrollment numbers to account for the loss in tuition revenues, analysts say.

If roughly 50 undocumented students transfer to the University of Maryland under the new law, the school would lose roughly \$820,800 in tuition revenues for a single year without adjusting enrollment numbers.

Lawmakers from both sides of the aisle voiced skepticism over the murky cost estimates up until the bill was passed fewer than four hours before the end of the 2011 legislative session.

"We would love to have these people educated but ... the issue is who pays for it," said Sen. David R. Brinkley, R-Carroll and Frederick counties. "It either comes from the taxpayer or it comes from other students at the school because it gets passed along in the form of fees."

Meanwhile, a conservative lawmaker is trying to muster up the support to bring a lawsuit against the Maryland legislation.

Del. Pat McDonough, R-Baltimore County, says he is talking to two "major national legal foundations" about overturning the law.

"Maryland has become a Disneyland for illegal immigrants, providing attraction and free rides and is costing taxpayers billions of dollars," McDonough said. "The in-state tuition act will make things much worse, attracting more illegal immigrants."

But the legal precedents aren't promising for McDonough, less than a year after California's Supreme Court upheld a similar state law.